

## Roberto Bolaño's fiction: An expanding universe; David Foster Wallace and 'The long thing': new essays on the novels; The Maximalist novel: from Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666

Article (Accepted Version)

Ward, Kiron (2015) Roberto Bolaño's fiction: An expanding universe; David Foster Wallace and 'The long thing': new essays on the novels; The Maximalist novel: from Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666. *Textual Practice*, 29 (2). pp. 379-387. ISSN 0950-236X

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## Kiron Ward

Chris Andrews, Roberto Bolaño's Fiction: An Expanding Universe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), xx+304pp., £20.50 (hbk)

Marshall Boswell ed., David Foster Wallace and 'The Long Thing': New Essays on the Novels (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), xii+272pp., £19.99 (pbk)

Stefano Ercolino, The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666, trans. Albert Sbragia (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), xvi+208pp., £60 (hbk)

In his seminal study *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Márquez*,<sup>1</sup> Franco Moretti posited a new way of understanding the seemingly anomalous group of super-canonical mega-texts 'that the modern West has subjected to lengthy scrutiny': '*Faust*, *Moby-Dick*, *The Nibelung's Ring*, *Ulysses*, *The Cantos*, *The Waste Land*, *The Man Without Qualities*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. These are not just any old books. They are monuments' (p. 1). Moretti's study begins with the assertion that, although these texts are treated as 'one-off cases', there seems to be so many of them that 'it is far likelier there is something wrong with the initial taxonomy' (pp. 1-2). Yoking together the many arguments Moretti makes throughout *Modern Epic* is the idea that the growing number of these hyper-ambitious fictions should be read not as oddities, but as part of a pan-national tradition of 'modern epics', or 'world texts.'

Only a handful of studies have picked up where Moretti's provocative, and not always watertight, argument leaves off; yet his comparativist approach looms large over three recent studies by Chris Andrews, Marshall Boswell, and Stefano Ercolino. In *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction*, Andrews characterises Bolaño's style of literary expansiveness as the drift towards 'a utopia of unending narration', and tries to

understand how Bolaño's peculiar system for 'expanded or "exploded" fiction has proven so popular in the Anglophone world (pp. xiii, xii). Not dissimilarly, Boswell introduces the eleven constitutive essays in *David Foster Wallace and 'The Long Thing'* according to Edward Mendelson's famous definition of 'Encyclopedic Narrative':<sup>2</sup> according to Boswell, Wallace wrote with Mendelson's description of novels that attempt to 'render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture' 'firmly in mind' (pp. vii, viii). In contrast to the overtly author-specific aims of Andrews' and Boswell's texts, Ercolino's *The Maximalist Novel* seeks to establish a general theory of 'maximalism' in the contemporary novel. Each of these new studies represents a discrete approach to the questions Moretti's *Modern Epic* raised about the relationship certain ambitious novels have with mastery, totality, and canonicity; and between them, it is clear that Moretti's comparativist paradigm is winning out. Taking these three studies together, recent scholarship of contemporary 'modern epics' or 'world texts' looks to be more interested in texts' generic commonalities than their supposed immanent distinction. Perhaps surprisingly, it is Andrews' and Boswell's single-author studies, and not Ercolino's survey, that demonstrate this comparativism most successfully.

Andrews, who made his name as the English translator of Bolaño's shorter fiction, is the first critic to produce an English language book on Latin American literature's most recent *cause célèbre*. Andrews makes clear in his introduction that his study is not interested in reconstructing the myth surrounding the life of the self-described '*poeta y vago*' ('poet and vagabond'), but is a straightforward 'book of literary criticism' that concentrates solely on the published fiction in order to discern 'how it was (and is) composed, how it manages narrative tension, how Bolaño's characters experience their selves in time, how they damage and protect one another,

and what ethical and political value are implied by their interactions' (pp. ix, xi). Andrews succeeds magisterially in meeting these goals, patiently building his structural analysis into a compelling vision of Bolaño's contemporary significance.

The basis of Andrews' argument is an attempt to understand, genetically, the 'fiction-making system' through which Bolaño, who wrote the bulk of his oeuvre in the final ten years of his life, was able to combine 'extraordinary productivity' with 'genuine inventiveness' (pp. 33-4). Reading the choices Bolaño made when expanding 'Carlos Ramírez Hoffman' (*Nazi Literature in the Americas*) into *Distant Star* and Auxilio Lacouture's monologue in *The Savage Detectives* into *Amulet*, Andrews proposes that Bolaño operated by 'scaling up the rhetorical figure of tmesis' (p. 34): revisiting published texts and developing them from within, Bolaño cut into his stories and characters and added more, recycling while expanding. Amidst this writerly cannibalism, Bolaño embeds 'metarepresentations' (p. 48), a clunky term for descriptions of fictional artworks, which provide his characters ample room for over-interpreting the narratives of which they are a part. In all of this, Andrews finds the method by which Bolaño was able to create his 'expanding universe'. This, as Andrews makes clear, is not 'radically new' (p. 34); but, reading it all through the late story 'Labyrinth' (*The Secret of Evil*), he demonstrates how Bolaño's method loads fiction with a vital autonomy. What, then, is to be made of Bolaño's fictional characters, so peculiarly divisible into the noble aimless (Diego Soto, Cesárea Tinajero, Hans Reiter) and the outright evil (Carlos Wieder, the King of the Rent Boys, Leo Sammer)? It is on this question that Andrews builds his conception of Bolaño's 'minimalist ethics' (p. 178). Surveying Bolaño's heroes and villains and the physical and intellectual conflicts they come to, and using his own extensive knowledge of Spanish literary criticism, theory, philosophy, sociology, and

psychology to provide ‘interesting outward routes,’ Andrews posits the ‘sense of what matters’ in Bolaño’s fictional universe (pp. xvii, 172).

In Andrews’ estimation, Bolaño is fundamentally an ‘ethically and politically oriented’ writer (p. 172); of course, the question that all Bolaño’s readers find themselves facing is what exactly the ethical basis of stories that are so frequently about terrible crimes could be. Andrews makes his point by insisting on Bolaño’s tendency away from excessive gore and exaggeration in his fiction. Reading ‘The Part about the Crimes,’ 2666’s notorious fictionalised account of the femicide in Ciudad Juárez, Andrews points out that the narrative focus is on the victims’ bodies and presumed last movements rather than the actual criminal acts, and that the number of bodies found is exactly the same as in Sergio González Rodríguez’s investigative account of the phenomenon, *Huesos en el desierto*<sup>3</sup> (invaluably, for anyone working on Bolaño’s *magnum opus*, Andrews appends his study with a table comparing the details of the victims in 2666 and *Huesos*). For Andrews, what makes Bolaño’s artistic approach to torture, holocaust, and femicide ethically minimal is his emphasis on uncertainty in aiding or abetting them. This is clearest in his interpretation of the litany of writers and artists in Bolaño’s oeuvre: be they leftist (Juan Stein) or fascist (the whole cast of *Nazi Literature in the Americas*), in oblivion (Boris Ansky) or world-renowned (Benno von Archimboldi), Bolaño’s fiction presents its readers with artists whose impact is never predictable; ‘the effects of imaginative writing are indirect and incalculable’ (p. 203). As such, Andrews proposes that in Bolaño’s novels uncertainty must be the ethical basis from which all political actions are taken and evaluated; in this, Bolaño’s fictional universe becomes an extended meditation on the political outcomes of uncertainty. This reflects suggestively on scenes like Archimboldi’s discussion with Alexander Fürst Pückler at the end of 2666.

For all this uncertainty, Andrews nevertheless identifies various ‘prompts’ through which he maintains Bolaño encourages his readers to identify ‘some acts as good and others as bad’ (p. 172). Combining Giorgio Agamben’s idea of ‘neotenic openness’ with Pierre Bourdieu on ‘social aging’ (p. 194), Andrews suggests that Bolaño’s fiction values a type of immaturity that keeps characters from relinquishing their aspirations to the direction of large institutions; characters like Arturo Belano and Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix make for fruitful comparison in this light. Similarly neat is Andrews’ connection of Bolaño’s focus on writers to his own theories of how Bolaño has come to be raised into the pantheon of Spanish-speaking writers read in the Anglophone world (think of Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Julio Cortázar, as opposed to José Lezama Lima and César Aira). Considering the so-called ‘Bolaño Bubble’, Andrews uses Bolaño’s obsession with representing artists in his fictional universe to reflect on his own anomalous success, and elaborates on the inferred ethics of these representations:

Although it can be difficult to accept the uncertainty principle...doing so should leave us a little freer and more independent in our judgments, less inclined to revise them upward, as the fortunate published of the long-seller sometimes does, or downward, as believers in the intrinsic virtue of the marginal sometimes do when the object of their early enthusiasm loses its social distinctiveness. (p. 32)

By qualifying Bolaño in this way, Andrews relativizes his subject, keeping it within the perspective of a wider tradition; indeed, as he insists, it would be churlish to forget that ‘Bolaño’s themes, especially in the two long novels, tally with an ancient and gendered conception of what makes for great literature’ (p. 25).

A similar interrogation of canonicity is largely absent from Boswell’s *David Foster Wallace and ‘The Long Thing’*. The issue of Wallace’s proto-canoncity is, for its contributors, implicit in the fact of the collection; as Adam Kelly notes in his essay, ‘the study of Wallace’s work is reaching a point of critical mass at which it should no

longer be necessary to argue for Wallace's place in the canon' (p. 4). Nevertheless, the collection is concerned with what it is about Wallace's work that makes it already canonical; as Boswell's allusion to Edward Mendelson's critical work on encyclopaedic narrative in the preface indicates, each essay is in some sense trying to locate the traditions out of which Wallace emerged and into which he has written. The collection is focused solely on Wallace's three novels (*The Broom of the System*, *Infinite Jest*, *The Pale King*), and is grouped according to two aims: first, to understand the type of novelist Wallace was by looking at motif, pattern, and trend across his oeuvre; and second, to develop the critical industries around each of the novels.

The essays, which were originally published across two issues of *Studies in the Novel*,<sup>4</sup> are, by and large, of high quality and, although many of the themes and theories covered will be familiar to Wallace critics, the collection is a valuable addition to Wallace scholarship (if not quite so 'new' as the book's subtitle claims). In the first section, Kelly traces the development of the dialogue form across Wallace's novels, linking it to Socratic inquiry and Dostoevskian heteroglossia, which provides a narrative for understanding simultaneously the development of Wallace's style and ideas. Kelly's essay makes for a solid framework for thinking through the rest of the essays in the section, in particular Allard den Dulk's impressively accessible analysis of the role of existential thought in Wallace's fiction; den Dulk focuses on Wallace's debt to Søren Kierkegaard specifically, and draws very convincing parallels between *The Pale King*'s 'tortured father' and *Either/Or*'s 'Johannes the Seducer' (p. 49).

The essays in the second section are no less ambitious. Bradley J. Fest's discussion of Wallace's *The Broom of the System* and 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way,' which, as the collection's only piece dedicated to the earlier

fiction, is something of an outlier, examines the ways in which Wallace's early fiction 'fails'. In this, Fest formalises a certain interpretation Wallace himself had of his fiction: that his early texts, *The Broom of the System* in particular, failed on their own terms. Yet if the collection tacitly accepts Wallace's perspective on his early work, it wholeheartedly rejects the sense of failure that can haunt discussions of a work as unfinished as *The Pale King*. Stephen J. Burn's essay does this particularly well, outlining *The Pale King*'s genealogy while underscoring how its 'fascination with consciousness' works as one of its key 'unifying mechanisms' (p. 150-1). Burns' argument, which bears all the hallmarks of an intense and productive stay in Wallace's archive at the Harry Ransom Center, speaks suggestively to Conley Wouters' essay in the same section on how *The Pale King* enacts a form that sustains the 'unlikely combination' of subjective experience and objective data as a means of suggesting that 'cohabitational harmony between consciousness and information, human and machine, is both possible and productive' (p. 186).

David Letzler's contribution focuses most clearly on the conscious encyclopaedism Boswell attributes to Wallace in his preface. Letzler carefully positions *Infinite Jest* within the tradition Moretti outlines in *Modern Epic*, casting him as a post-postmodern instantiation of a tradition extending from Herman Melville to William Gaddis. By carefully negotiating a path through recent scholarship of 'encyclopaedic novels' (p. 128), Letzler is able to draw productive comparisons between *Infinite Jest* and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, and to begin thinking about how studies of 'modern epics' can relate to the current revolution in encyclopaedism being brought about by Wikipedia. Borrowing the Wikipedian phrase 'cruft', which refers to superfluous information that makes Wikipedia entries confusing, Letzler posits that the challenge of contemporary encyclopaedism in



general, and Wallace in particular, is that it ‘requires us to develop our abilities to filter information to their maximum capacities’ (p. 146). The point of this, for Wallace, is that it forces readers to ‘learn how to navigate around...junk data to find text that is actually important’ (p. 146). Personally, I find this interpretation of surplus information a little naïve: surely information, cruff or not, is always presupposing a political angle? Indeed, the fact that the collection’s other essays contain such compelling exegeses of Wallace’s engagement with theories of entertainment, boredom, irony, and citizenship rather undermines the suggestion that readers should be keener identifiers of cruff. That said, Letzler’s essay is a significant contribution to scholarship of contemporary ‘world texts’, and, in its refusal to read Wallace singularly, a very clear example of how the type of comparativism with which Moretti insists such texts be read is opening new critical paths.

Such comparativism is the beating heart of Ercolino’s *The Maximalist Novel*, which signposts its debt to Moretti not only through an acknowledgement at the beginning and an intelligent evaluation of *Modern Epic* in its introduction, but also in its adoption of Moretti’s infectious semi-informal style. Ercolino’s short study sets out its terms of reference very plainly: ‘The literary object I am to define in this study is the *maximalist novel*. [...] “Maximalist”, for the multiform maximizing and hypertrophic tension of the narrative; “novel”, because the texts I will discuss are indeed novels’ (p. xi). Similarly clear is his aim: ‘to stake out a new conceptual territory that will contribute to a reconfiguration of the traditional view of the postmodern as well as a rethinking of the development of the novel in the second half of the twentieth century’ (p. xi). Ercolino uses seven novels he sees as representative examples of contemporary maximalism (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Infinite Jest*, *Underworld*, *White Teeth*, *The Corrections*, *2666*, and *2005 dopo Cristo*) to cut into

the ‘continuum’ of the genre and discern its ‘morphological and symbolic identity’ (pp. xii, xiii). His study is structured around the ten elements that he argues define the maximalist novel ‘as a genre of the contemporary novel: 1) Length; 2) Encyclopedic mode; 3) Dissonant chorality; 4) Diegetic exuberance; 5) Completeness; 6) Narratorial omniscience; 7) Paranoid imagination; 8) Intersemioticity; 9) Ethical commitment; 10) Hybrid realism’ (pp. xii-xiv). Breaking up this ‘decatalogue’ (p. xvi) are interpolations on maximalism’s relationship with minimalism, and its internal dialectic between each narrative’s centrifugal and centripetal forces, which he describes as a ‘chaos-function/cosmos-function’.

Ercolino knows his literary theory; his introduction, which positions his study between Moretti’s ‘world texts’, Tom LeClair’s ‘systems novel’,<sup>5</sup> and Frederick R. Karl’s ‘mega-novel’,<sup>6</sup> makes well his case for understanding maximalism as a genre beyond the questions of mastery, encyclopaedism, and national identity. What becomes clear is that for Ercolino the maximalist novel is ultimately the contemporary epic: ‘we will speak not of epic, even a modern one, but of a novel structurally *hybridized* with the epic, of a novel that cannibalizes the epic to launch itself toward ever vaster and more totalizing horizons’ (p. 14). This develops Massimo Fusillo’s fine essay ‘Epic, Novel’,<sup>7</sup> which contends that while the epic may seem to have disappeared with the historical conditions that produced it, it has in fact survived ““accommodated” in other forms’ (p. 16), namely the novel.

It is on this theoretical ground that Ercolino’s argument is at its strongest. In his chapter on ‘Encyclopedic Mode’, for example, he makes a compelling case for understanding encyclopaedism as a tool, rather than a goal, of maximalist fiction (pp. 39-40). Similarly, his discussion of ‘Completeness’ intelligently posits a way of reading surplus information as more than the mere ‘cruft’ David Letzler identifies in

*Infinite Jest*, asserting that ‘it is necessary to definitively dispense with the idea...that maximalist novelists abandon themselves to the wildest associations of ideas and to the most unpredictable meanderings in an out-of-control narrative delirium’ (p. 78). Unfortunately, Ercolino’s strength in this area is not matched by compelling textual analyses: in such a short study, there is simply not enough room for Ercolino’s theorising to get adequately close to the content of each of the seven chosen novels. This means that his textual analyses are either frustratingly demonstrative, as when he simply quotes long passages from each of the novels in succession to prove his points, or disappointingly *de rigueur* (there is not much new in this study for anyone familiar with scholarship of each of the texts).

This problem is clearest in the chapter on ‘Ethical Commitment’, which forms a key part of Ercolino’s reconfigured vision of contemporary fiction’s relationship with postmodernism. Ercolino is not wrong to insist on the fallacious simplicity of reading contemporary fiction’s ethical engagement ‘under the banner of a rupture with the postmodern literary system’, but his attempt to demonstrate the ethical commitment of the maximalist novel manifests its own quite unforgivable simplification: a spurious list of each of the seven novels’ ethical ‘themes’, which Ercolino uses to make the wild generalisation that ‘maximalist imagery’ is ‘highly sensitive’ to the ethics of drugs and addiction (pp. 136-7). It is unfortunate that Ercolino chooses this method of collectively and comparatively interpreting his seven novels, but it is consistent with the superficiality of much of the study’s textual analysis.

That said, Ercolino’s comparative method is in itself, if not in its execution, a valuable attempt to understand these types of texts beyond single author silos, and far away from Frederick R. Karl’s odious claim that such texts are ““written mainly...by

white Protestant males”’ (p. 9). Ercolino’s comparativism provides a platform from which maximalism’s different voices can be analysed; it is just a shame that his own comparative analyses of his seven maximalist novels is relatively meagre. Part of the reason for this, I suspect, is down to the choices made when selecting his seven representatively maximalist novels. In particular, the case for understanding Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* as maximalism is never really fully made. Ercolino clumsily betrays the superficiality of his understanding of Smith in his chapter on ‘Length’, in which he tries to argue that *White Teeth*’s publication was marked by an advertising campaign fetishising its length. The publication of *White Teeth* has been shorthand among scholars of contemporary British fiction for the commodification of a certain type of liberal multiculturalism for some time,<sup>8</sup> and Ercolino’s attempt to suggest otherwise betrays a rushed effort to make the marketing of *Infinite Jest* a model for the marketing of all bestselling maximalist novels. This is not to say, however, that Ercolino does a bad job of trying to work out the ‘thorny problem’ of the inclusion of ‘women or minority writers’ in accounts of maximalism (p. 9). Rather, it is to say that his argument for understanding maximalism among women and minority writers would probably be better made without Smith, and with fewer of the usual suspects; Leslie Marmon Silko, Karen Tei Yamashita, Eduardo Galeano, Nicola Barker, Thomas King, and Ma Jian are all authors of recent tomes that would have made for compelling inclusion. If Ercolino’s generic designation is to become a useful critical term, it will need to bring as much light to the ‘minority’ fiction of which he is clearly aware as it does to the classics.

For all its flaws, Ercolino’s echoing of Moretti’s case for understanding such ‘world texts’ comparatively, and not in isolation, is welcome. Between *The Maximalist Novel*, Roberto Bolaño’s *Expanding Universe*, and David Foster Wallace

and *'The Long Thing'*, an excellent precedent for future studies of this tradition has been set: that Andrews' and Boswell's texts are more successful than Ercolino's should give scholars heed to the pitfalls of losing sight of their hermeneutic focus. This is vital: defining exactly the nature of this tradition—modern epic? world text? maximalism? encyclopaedism?—seems still to be up for debate. It is clear that it will be for a while to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Márquez* (London: Verso, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Edward Mendelson, 'Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon', *Modern Language Notes*, 91:6 (1976), pp. 1267-1275.

<sup>3</sup> Sergio González Rodríguez, *Huesos en el desierto* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Marshall Boswell (ed.), *Studies in the Novel*, 44:3-4 (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Tom LeClair, *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Fredrick R. Karl, *American Fictions 1980-2000: Whose America is it Anyway?* (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Massimo Fusillo, 'Epic, Novel', trans. Michael F. Moore, in Franco Moretti (ed.) *The Novel, Volume 2: Forms and Themes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 32-63.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example: Corinne Fowler, 'A Tale of Two Novels: Developing a Devolved Approach to Black British Writing', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 43:3 (2008), pp. 75-94.